Crossing Cultures

“The missionary task is that of sacrifice. Not the sacrifice of leaving friends and comfortable situations at home, but the sacrifice of reexamining one’s own cultural assumptions.” —William Reyburn

Does what we think and feel about different cultures really matter? Yes! Diversity can enrich our lives and our world. It is important to understand and appreciate differences in others. But the place to begin thinking about cultural diversity is with you.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:16-21.

Culture groups
All missionaries, whether they realize it or not, cross cultural boundaries to take the gospel around the world. Not only those who go overseas but also those who minister within the United States need to understand cultural differences in order to minister effectively.

Culture groups are people from various backgrounds who share common values and behaviors. Do you think you will encounter different culture groups during your trip? Why or why not?

You may be surprised to find yourself encountering many different culture groups during your trip. Even people who have the same ethnic background as you may be a part of a different culture group. For example, residents of a nursing home may have their own unique culture. Their values and behaviors probably differ from those of your culture group.

What other culture groups can you think of? Which of these might you have contact with during your trip?
One cultural difference you may encounter is the difference between high-context and low-context cultures. Much of the United States has a low-context culture. Below are some of the differences between the two types of cultures.\(^5\)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High-Context</th>
<th>Low-Context</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal space:</td>
<td>Closeness</td>
<td>Distance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touch:</td>
<td>Natural to embrace</td>
<td>Guard personal space</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eye contact:</td>
<td>Avoid direct eye contact</td>
<td>Make direct eye contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family:</td>
<td>Extended</td>
<td>Nuclear</td>
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No matter if you are a part of a high-context or a low-context culture, reading the chart should help you better understand the other type of culture. Spend time thanking God for helping you understand the variety of cultures He has created.

**Successful Mission Teams**

Martha VanCise, author of *Successful Mission Teams*, advises the missions volunteer to remember that a missions trip is not a vacation. You may have wonderful experiences, see great sights, and find nifty souvenirs, but none of that is the purpose of your missions trip. You are there as part of a team to serve, not to cater to your own wishes or be catered to by others. For Americans raised on the philosophy of individual rights, teamwork can be a hard concept to understand, much less live out.

Can you think of a time when you were part of a team? What were the good things about it?

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What were the not-so-good things about being on a team?

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Food is one area where team members must adjust their likes and dislikes. Some meals will be served to you, and you will have no control over the menu. Unless you truly cannot eat the food due to
an allergy or other medical condition, take what is set before you with gratitude. If you can’t manage gratitude, then try to take it without complaining! Never make jokes about the food, or take more than your share.

Another touchy area is transportation. Take your turn sitting in the uncomfortable seats or standing in the crowded places. Remember, if you are working with a local missionary or church, they do not have time to drive you around.

The most important thing to remember, however, is to maintain good relationships with team members, locals, and missionaries. It is not possible for people who are on the field for a week or ten days to understand all the dynamics of the place where they are serving. Martha VanCise offers the following tips:

*Do not take sides in conflicts.

*Do not make unfavorable comparisons between your home and where you are serving. Nobody likes having his or her home ridiculed, and it will make you appear insensitive and superior.

*Do not make snap judgments about the missionary's standard of living.

*Do not try to take over the project, even if you have expertise in the area and know a better way. Set an example, but don’t insist on doing it your way.

*Do not make promises to people on the field about future help or resources!!

*Do follow the missionary’s lead in giving or not giving to individuals, no matter how needy they appear.

*Do take time to get to know the people among whom you are working.

*Do thank local hosts for hospitality, even if it is meager by your standards. Consider that it may be a sacrifice on their part.

*Do keep a positive attitude and resist the temptation to join the complainers.